THE JOURNEY

Exodus 14:5-18, Mark 1:16-20

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"...it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Recently having packed all our belongings, said goodbye to friends, and left what had become home for an uncertain future, I find that I am unusually sensitive to stories like the one we heard in the Old Testament Lesson this morning.

It happens back on the edge of recorded history. Under the cover of darkness a group of semitic tribes packs up and leaves Egypt of the Pharohs to begin a four decade sojourn in the desert.

It wasn't forty years of wandering in the wilderness for us of course, but in a sense we have been involved with you since a day last Spring when a friend who knows you and me suggested that I might at least be aware of this Church. It goes much further back than that really. For me, it goes as far back as I can remember, to my early fascination and love for the city. It was New York then because I had never been west of Pittsburgh, and New York had Joe Dimagio and Leonard Bernstein and the Empire State Building and subways. But it was in Chicago, as a student, that what I might be inclined one day to call a divine agitation in my soul began...There were many sources...from being stunned by beauty, when one time love overcame reason and we spent a fortune for Chicago Symphony tickets to hear Beethoven: and from being transfixed when one day we walked, totally innocent and unprepared -- into the Art Institute and stumbled into the Impressionists. And it came from our first experience of being nurtured by the Church, a church we didn't know much and certainly didn't know us, the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, Its co-pastor, Ulysses Blakely, came to our South Side apartment to visit us and our new baby and was the first person other than her mother and me to hold her. He was black, part of an integrated pastorate in an integrated congregation that not only nurtured us, but enthralled me with its hopefulness and its almost naive modeling of what could be and must be but is not yet among all of God's children.

It came from a growing sense, always deep within me even before I could articulate it, that what transpires in the cities is critically important for the general welfare of the nation, the civilization even. Here we are at our best and worst, our strongest and weakest, our most noble and most trivial. Here beauty and ugliness, the sublime and the ridiculous, hope and despair, mingle daily in a colorful, vital tapestry of our common humanity that I have never been able to ignore or resist, and distance from which has always left me feeling as if I am missing something important.

When we left Lafayette, Indiana for Columbus, Ohio, we came to Chicago for one last look around, and to make sure our children knew. It was a lovely day, I recall. We visited the acquarium, Field Museum, walked around the fountain, parked somewhere in this neighborhood, peeked into this church and then went to the top of the Hancock Building -- which one son was forever building in his room with Lego blocks. As if it were yesterday I remember looking down at the surprising symmetry of Fourth Church

and thinking to myself -- in God's providence would it be possible -- is it possible -- that I might someday be involved with a church like that? My twenty year old remembers me saying it, he told me the other day.

It hasn't been forty years, but it has been a long time. It has been twelve months since the formal correspondence with the committee began, and nine months since the conversation took a serious turn, and about six months since we realized that it was, in fact, a possibility, and four months since you met and elected me, and it has been two months since the moving van pulled away from our home in Columbus and stopped traffic on Michigan Avenue the next day.

I am Biblical scholar enough to know that Israel had to fight her way into Canaan after a very reluctant and recalcitrant four decades in the wilderness, and to recall that Moses never did make it but had to be content with a look from the far side of the river; and I am honest enough, I think, to become uncomfortable whenever the pracher sees his or her own experience too precisely reflected in the stories of the Bible, and above all, I am realist enough not to identify any church, any job, any place, as the Kingdom of God on earth, or the Promised Land, nevertheless Sue and I feel this morning that we have been a long time coming and we are very glad to be here.

It is with no little intentionality that we heard a piece of that other story this morning, that primal tale of God's people on the move, in which we can see so much of our story, each of us, that it is astonishing, almost eery sometimes.

The original is marvelous. Under the cover of darkness, the children of Israel pack up and leave Egypt. A series of plagues and calamaties, and some tough negotiating with Moses has convinced Pharoh finally that things will be quieter in his Kingdom if these Hebrew tribes go away. And so at night the order is issued: "Go. Pack up and leave. Take your cattle, your herds of sheep, your belongings, and get out of here." So they left, loaded down with unleavened dough and jewelry they had taken from the Egyptians on their way out. They strapped their kneading bowls to their backs, got the children and the grandparents organized, rounded up the goats and the sheep and the cat and dog, looked around at the old neighborhood one last time and walked into -- the wilderness.

Promised land? Not for forty years. For an entire generation it's going to be homelessness, lostness, wilderness. They didn't take the available Philistine roads, the most direct route. Instead Moses headed South, on a torturous circuitous route, "by way of the wilderness" to the Red Sea, and the sense of it is that the journey itself is the point. It's not simply the quickest, most convenient way to get from slavery to freedom. There is growing, deepening, becoming which must happen on the journey.

As they make camp at one of those places with an unpronounceable name, the people back at Pharoh's palace are beginning to have second thoughts. If you have ever acted spontaneously and then after sleeping on it wondered how you could have left your senses so totally, you know about this dynamic. In the distilled light of morning Pharoh's advisers are overheard saying things like "What in the world came over us? We let the slaves go last night. There went the labor force. Think of the economic implications, the consumer price index, inflation, deficits."

So Pharoh mobilizes, gathers his chariots and infantry, heads south and his advance parties report a large encampment at Pi-hahiroth, near the Sea of Reeds.

Meanwhile, in the camp, the Hebrews are just beginning to deal with the enormity of the step they are taking. They had been living in Egypt for a long time, several centuries in fact. It was home. And here they are on the edge of the wilderness. There are no houses, no food, no water. There is nothing in the wilderness that resembles the accoutrements of the civilization they enjoyed in Egypt. Just as the enormity of all that was beginning to sink in, they saw dust on the horizon. Other than a great wind, there was only one thing that made a dust cloud like that -- the horses and chariots and marching feet of an advancing army. Imagine how that must have been! Imagine the terror, the dry tightness in the throat and chest. Imagine the fathers, the mothers, the ones who had made the fateful commitment for their families, who had roused sleeping children and made it sound like an adventure, and shaken awake their aging parents and said "Now -- it's happening...what you've prayed for. We're going home. You're not going to die in an Egyptian bed and be buried in Egyptian soil."

I can feel the intensity: the anger and fear and rage when they saw the ominous cloud of dust. I can understand the bitterness of what they said to Moses: "were there no graves in Egypt, that you should have brought us to die in the wilderness? See what you have done to us...We would rather be slaves than die in the wilderness." And there is no more brave, nor perhaps foolish, answer than what Moses said..."Fear not: stand firm. See the salvation of the Lord which he will work for you today."

What comes next, of course, is the unlikely escape, the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the commencement of the wilderness wandering. I like this part of the story best, however -- the part at the beginning when the enormity of life's decisions becomes suddenly clear; when everybody starts having second thoughts...Pharoh about letting them go, the Israelites about going...and with their backs to the sea and the army advancing the people make the simple observation that life was a lot safer back in slavery than it is out here in the detached freedom of the wilderness.

I like this part of the story because of its humanness. We may not be able to identify with everything in the Bible. You and I may never know what it means to have a burning bush religious experience. We may never stand in a moment of shining theological clarity on some Mt. Sinai. But we know what these poople were feeling. We know about the riskiness of the journey and the complaining in the wilderness.

I like it because in the story the unsettling, disturbing, fermenting power is coming from God. God agitates for their freedom, makes the people unsatisfied with their bondage, leads them out of slavery and into the wilderness. There...in the wilderness, on the Journey, God apprehends them, comes to them, finds them, loves, judges them, gives order and structure to their life and molds them into the people, the nation, he wants them to be.

The process of living life is a journey, the destination of which none of us really knows. The first major life task each of us undertakes is launching out and away from the security of our mother's womb and for the next two decades or so the tasks of preparing for life apart from the security of our parents occupies us totally. Psychiatrist Bruno Bettleheim, in a wonderful book, The Uses of Enchantment, points out that it is a major motif in children's stories and fairy tales. "He works...being pushed out of the home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of the home, an excruciatingly painful experience." (P79)

Among the more painful experiences I can recall are the days when my parents abandoned me in the room of a college dormitory, helped me move in and then got back into the Dodge and actually drove away without me -- and the days three decades later when I did the same thing. God's providence is implicated in the leaving, the journey, the painful process of separation. At our best we know and affirm the wisdom of it, even though it hurts -- both as young person and as parent.

Life is a journey. Taking a new position, assuming new responsibilities, moving to a new community, involves the anxiety of leaving a job one knows, a community one has come to call home, and friends one has come to love dearly. Something like one American in five does it every year.

What risky traveling to choose, at 21 or 22, our life's work. Who knows where it will lead or even if we're on the right road. What more hazardous journey is there than to stand here in our early twenties and promise to love, honor and respect this woman or man who I don't really know, and whose growing into whatever she will become is every bit as much of a mystery as mine is? Who knows at 25 if you're going to love the person that bride will become in two decades?

Every growing, every becoming, is something of a journey into a new wilderness, cut off from old security. Every intellectual or spiritual growing is accompanied by a sense of uneasiness, fear even, because it means leaving behind what used to be a secure and safe certainty. Whether the topic is that the world is round, not flat as everyone used to know it was, or that God has created all people equally in the divine image, or that women are as capable of professional expertise as men, or that every popular revolution is not ipso facto Marxist, or every cry for economic and racial justice a threat to our natural security, we need to hear the intriguing affirmation in this old story that God wants us to grow, and sometimes that means leaving some safe security behind -- that he is the one leading us on the journey, that the uncertainty of the wilderness is part of the plan and also the place where God will find us.

Sometimes the journey does not seem to fit any plan. Sometimes the wilderness makes no sense and we feel ourselves literally dragged into it, by forces over which we have no control and from which God seems disturbingly absent. A spouse dies without warning and without reason, and one day suddenly we are in a wilderness of aloneness cut off from every familiar structure of joy and meaning...or the position for which we have been preparing, readying, opens and passes before our eyes and is given to someone else and we are in a deep wilderness of disappointment and self-doubt...or our youngest child graduates and leaves and our universe of meaning, the tasks which commanded our attention, summoned our strength and gave reason to our living, are at an end...or social cocktails have become a twice daily ritual, and we keep denying what we know about addiction and cannot summon the fortitude to call this wilderness alcoholism...or it is a divorce we didn't intend...or the slow atrophy of a once lively and ecstatis love...or the Sunday morning suspicion that the atheists in history knew more than the people of faith and, although we are far from life in full revolt or even declaring God's death, once adequate faith has turned brittle in this dry new wilderness.

None of us will avoid all of those wildernesses, and when we are there it is good, redeeming even, to recall that people in the Bible end up in the wilderness and complain about being there and that the journey away from the safe secure certainties is precisely the place where God comes to his people and loves them and saves them.

The life which intends to be Christian will be a journey. It has been so since Jesus of Nazareth walked by the Sea of Galilee and called Simon and Andrew, James and John to discipleship. Even though we are inclined to define religion as believing certain ideas about God to be true, Jesus defined it as a journey, as getting up from where you are sitting and following, as leaving behind the safety and security and comfortable predictability of fishing nets and traveling with him...or in nearer terms, as letting go of the ideologies, the ideas, the political certainties, the social customs and even the heavy financial traditions and following along behind the Lord Christ. We Presbyterians need to recover that. Our faith is expressed in our theologyzing and theorizing about the human condition, our orderly traditions and our liturgical dignity. But faith ultimately is that singular act of getting up and leaving something behind, following Jesus on the journey of discipleship.

We'd like to know the destination. We are careful people. Our prudence and caution and conservatism serves us well mostly. It also makes us suspicious of a religious zealotry that contemplates walking away from the good life to serve humanity. We might even do that if we had intellectual clarity. We'd like to know who is leading us. We like to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is a God, that Jesus is his son, that this business has a life-time warranty and an eternal guarantee.

And the mystery of it all is that on the journey God apprehends his people. All he does with them ahead of time is make them restless. When they follow into the wilderness, when they leave the security of their fishing net behind and follow, he apprehends them, comes to them, judges them, loves them.

The theologians have understood it, none more poignantly than Deitrich Bonhoeffer who helped us see that you don't believe in Jesus until you obey him, follow him. The mystics, at their best, have experienced it and written about it eloquently. God comes, God saves. God is -- as we sojorn in the wilderness of solitude. And we have known. God has come. God will continue to come to love us, encourage us, strengthen us, save us -- on the journey.

In the words of the old hymn

> "When I tread the verge of Jordan
> Bid my anxious fears subside.
> Death of death and hell's destruction
> Land me safe on Canaan's side..."

Now to the One, who by the power at work within us, is able to do far more abudantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever. Amen.